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Agnew Needs Honing

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — When Vice President Agnew wound up his first week of campaigning here the other day, the question he left behind was: Can the scrubbed-up Spiro of '72 keep his audiences from snoring?

In his headlong flight from the "cutting edge" candidate image of his 1968 and 1970 incarnations, the distinguished "Second Magistrate," as he was called at one stop, has run smack into the danger of becoming America's biggest bore.

The positive, programmatic Agnew on display this year has an occasional flicker of the old pizzazz — a little jab that reminds the audiences of the slugger who was the favorite at Republican fund-raisers from coast to coast. But much of the time, he's come perilously close to fitting his own description of Ed Muskie's oratorical style — "as exciting as watching a refrigerator defrost."

STATESMANSHIP is the order on the day on the Agnew campaign, from the moment when the Vice President enters to the strains of "Ruffles and Flourishes" and "Hail Columbia," shoulders back, proud head erect, and always immaculately groomed.

Agnew looks presidential — which is exactly what he wants to do, for his own presumed long-term ambitions — and there's far more confidence and professionalism in his staff operation than there was when he campaigned as "Spiro Who" four years ago.

BUT THERE IS an essential aloofness to Agnew — a well of reserve — which no one, reporter or politician, finds easy to penetrate. Neither the social sessions, nor his press conferences, nor the formal speeches provide much clue to the direction of Agnew's own thinking.

One night, there was a faint reminder of the old Agnew, when he went after George McGovern for "parroting the propaganda of North Vietnam" in his criticisms of American bombing in Indochina. But by the next day, the Vice President was assuring everyone that he believed such criticism did not connote a lack of patriotism, and he deleted from a prepared speech a charge that McGovern was advocating "panicky piecemeal policies" of isolationism.

EVEN THE ECHO of those celebrated alliterations seems to make Agnew uncomfortable now. While it's true that he is criticizing McGovern's policies almost daily, he's staying well within the bounds of conventional political warfare and doing nothing to make his own tactics a center of controversy.

To fill the invective gap, Agnew has been dipping deep into his briefing book for bogs of information on the accomplishments of the Nixon administration and the contradictions in McGovern's positions.

In the past week, audiences eager for the old Agnew battle cries have been fed, instead, such stupefying information as the fact that Mr. Nixon has "tripled the number of foreign offices in the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs." Then they learned that, contrary to McGovern's assertions, President Coolidge did not provide amnesty for World War I deserters but only for "some 100 men who had deserted the Armed Forces after World War I."

AGNEW PADS his speeches with such stuffing because he apparently has little to say about the future directions of administration policy. Still less does he seem willing to discuss his own role in the administration, which is a subject of some mystery.

By the end of the first week on the road, there was even a question of how effective an Agnew, purged of his purple prose, could be in doing what he is most admired for by his public: expressing the traditional values of America against the challenge of the counter-culture.

THIS YEAR, there's no indication that dullness can much damage the Nixon-Agnew ticket. The only hope for relief from the tedium may be Agnew himself.

His pledge to stay on the high road is, happily, equivocal. As he said at a rally in Roanoke, "I want to tell you you're looking at a new Spiro Agnew — one who will stick to the issues and not engage in vicious attacks on his opponents. And if you don't believe me, you can ask my new speechwriters — Howard Cosell and Don Rickles."

For the sake of his future audiences, if not his future career, it's to be hoped that Cosell and Rickles arrive soon.